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☞ Details: Audit Report 05-4, An Evaluation: Children at Risk Program, Department of Public Instruction

(FORM UPDATED: 08/11/2010)

## WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE ... PUBLIC HEARING - COMMITTEE RECORDS

### 2005-06

(session year)

### Joint

(Assembly, Senate or Joint)

### Committee on Audit...

### COMMITTEE NOTICES ...

- Committee Reports ... **CR**
- Executive Sessions ... **ES**
- Public Hearings ... **PH**

### INFORMATION COLLECTED BY COMMITTEE FOR AND AGAINST PROPOSAL

- Appointments ... **Appt** (w/Record of Comm. Proceedings)
- Clearinghouse Rules ... **CRule** (w/Record of Comm. Proceedings)
- Hearing Records ... bills and resolutions (w/Record of Comm. Proceedings)  
(**ab** = Assembly Bill)                      (**ar** = Assembly Resolution)                      (**ajr** = Assembly Joint Resolution)  
(**sb** = Senate Bill)                              (**sr** = Senate Resolution)                      (**sjr** = Senate Joint Resolution)
- Miscellaneous ... **Misc**

## Record of Committee Proceedings

### Joint Legislative Audit Committee

#### Audit Report 05-4,

An Evaluation: Children at Risk Program, Department of Public Instruction.

April 27, 2005

#### **PUBLIC HEARING HELD**

- Present: (8) Senators Roessler, Cowles, S. Fitzgerald, Miller and Lassa; Representatives Kerkman, Travis and Cullen.
- Absent: (2) Representatives Jeskewitz and Kaufert.

#### Appearances For

- None.

#### Appearances Against

- None.

#### Appearances for Information Only

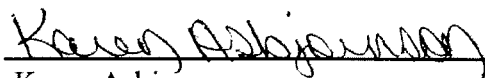
- Janice Mueller, Madison — State Auditor, Legislative Audit Bureau
- Paul Stuiber, Madison — Legislative Audit Bureau
- Anthony Evers, Madison — Deputy Superintendent, Department of Public Instruction
- Beth Lewis, Madison — School Administration Consultant, Department of Public Instruction
- Daniel Grego, Milwaukee — Executive Director, TransCenter for Youth, Inc.

#### Registrations For

- Joseph Quick, Madison — Madison Metropolitan School District

#### Registrations Against

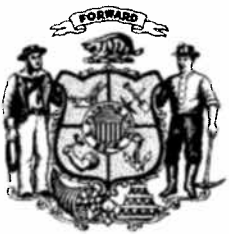
- None.



Karen Asbjornson  
Committee Clerk



# WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE





STATE OF WISCONSIN

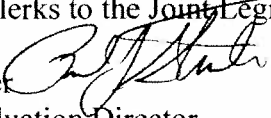
Legislative Audit Bureau

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Janice Mueller  
State Auditor

DATE: March 3, 2005

TO: Karen Asbjornson and Pamela Matthews  
Committee Clerks to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee

FROM: Paul J. Stuibel   
Program Evaluation Director

SUBJECT: Audit Report 05-4: Children At Risk Program

Enclosed is our evaluation of the Children At Risk Program, as required by s. 118.153(6), Wis. Stats. The program is administered by the Department of Public Instruction and is intended to reduce the number of students in grades 5 through 12 who are at risk of not graduating from high school. Since fiscal year 1990-91, the program has been appropriated \$3.5 million annually. In the 2003-04 school year, 21 school districts participated in the program; they identified 29,669 at-risk students.

1999 Wisconsin Act 123 modified statutes in response to recommendations of the Joint Legislative Council Special Committee on Children at Risk. Some of these changes were intended to make it easier to evaluate the effectiveness of programs by requiring districts to designate the programs on which Children At Risk funds had been spent. Because districts did not comply with this requirement, our ability to draw conclusions about program effectiveness is limited. However, we do know that:

- the percentage of at-risk students achieving at least three statutorily specified performance objectives declined to 40.2 percent, a five-year low, for the 2003-04 school year; and
- graduation rates increased by 6.5 percentage points in participating school districts compared to 2.5 percentage points for all school districts.

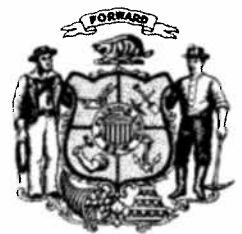
The report will be released on Friday, March 4 at 9:00 a.m. If you have any questions, please contact us.

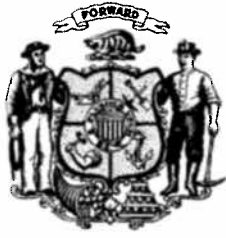
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Enclosures



# WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE



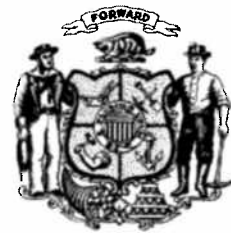


The following document was too large to scan into the committee record. The cover and table of contents, if available, have been scanned for your convenience.

Most large publications have been added to the Dr. H. Rupert Theobald Legislative Library collection. Search the LRB library catalog (LRBCat) (<http://lrbcatalog.legis.wisconsin.gov/>) for availability.

For further assistance, please contact the reference desk at (608) 266-0341 or email [lrb.reference@legis.wisconsin.gov](mailto:lrb.reference@legis.wisconsin.gov).

State of Wisconsin - Legislative Reference Bureau  
1 East Main Street, Suite 200  
Madison, WI 53703



An Evaluation

# **Children At Risk Program**

*Department of Public Instruction*

## **2005-2006 Joint Legislative Audit Committee Members**

Senate Members:

Carol A. Roessler, Co-chairperson  
Robert Cowles  
Scott Fitzgerald  
Mark Miller  
Julie Lassa

Assembly Members:

Suzanne Jeskewitz, Co-chairperson  
Samantha Kerkman  
Dean Kaufert  
David Travis  
David Cullen

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## LEGISLATIVE AUDIT BUREAU

The Bureau is a nonpartisan legislative service agency responsible for conducting financial and program evaluation audits of state agencies. The Bureau's purpose is to provide assurance to the Legislature that financial transactions and management decisions are made effectively, efficiently, and in compliance with state law and that state agencies carry out the policies of the Legislature and the Governor. Audit Bureau reports typically contain reviews of financial transactions, analyses of agency performance or public policy issues, conclusions regarding the causes of problems found, and recommendations for improvement.

Reports are submitted to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee and made available to other committees of the Legislature and to the public. The Audit Committee may arrange public hearings on the issues identified in a report and may introduce legislation in response to the audit recommendations. However, the findings, conclusions, and recommendations in the report are those of the Legislative Audit Bureau. For more information, write the Bureau at 22 E. Mifflin Street, Suite 500, Madison, WI 53703, call (608) 266-2818, or send e-mail to [leg.audit.info@legis.state.wi.us](mailto:leg.audit.info@legis.state.wi.us). Electronic copies of current reports are available on line at [www.legis.state.wi.us/lab](http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lab).

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State Auditor - Janice Mueller

Audit Prepared by

Paul Stuibler, Director and Contact Person  
Cherry Hill



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STATE OF WISCONSIN

Legislative Audit Bureau

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Janice Mueller  
State Auditor

March 4, 2005

Senator Carol A. Roessler and  
Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz, Co-chairpersons  
Joint Legislative Audit Committee  
State Capitol  
Madison, Wisconsin 53702

Dear Senator Roessler and Representative Jeskewitz:

As required by s. 118.153(6), Wis. Stats., we have completed an evaluation of the Children At Risk program, which is administered by the Department of Public Instruction. The program is intended to increase the number of students earning high school diplomas by improving services to those at risk of failing in or dropping out of school. It was created in 1985, and it has been appropriated \$3.5 million in general purpose revenue annually since fiscal year 1990-91.

The program was last modified by 1999 Wisconsin Act 123 in response to recommendations from the Joint Legislative Council Special Committee on Children At Risk. Since these changes were implemented, the number of participating school districts has increased from 13 to 21. In the 2003-04 academic year, these 21 districts identified 29,669 students as being at risk of not graduating from high school.

We found that districts have not fully complied with requirements to allocate funding to specific programs and have not collected data linking students who meet performance objectives to specific district programs. Therefore, we cannot isolate the effect Children At Risk funding has had on at-risk students. Graduation and dropout rates improved in participating districts, but when we analyzed district-wide at-risk student performance, we found that the number of students in participating school districts who met at least three statutory performance objectives—such as remaining in school, having an attendance rate of at least 70 percent, and demonstrating reading and math gains—decreased from 46.8 percent in 1999-2000 to 40.2 percent in 2003-04.

We appreciate the courtesy and cooperation extended to us by Department of Public Instruction staff and participating school districts. The agency's response follows the appendices.

Respectfully submitted,

*Janice Mueller*

Janice Mueller  
State Auditor

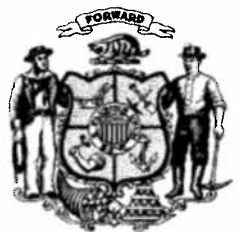
JM/PS/ss

*3 stat perf.  
prog small  
portion of  
3.5M  
→ 1.29*

*11 Although see grad rates improving I have concerns these other forms of measurement haven't shown these results*



# WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE





WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE

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**Joint Legislative Audit Committee**

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Committee Co-Chairs:  
State Senator Carol Roessler  
State Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz

For Immediate Release

March 4, 2005

For More Information Contact:

Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz  
Senator Carol Roessler

(608) 266-3796  
(608) 266-5300

### **Children At Risk Program Warrants Close Review**

(Madison) Joint Legislative Audit Committee co-chairs, Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz (R-Menomonee Falls) and Senator Carol Roessler (R-Oshkosh), announce the release of the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau's (LAB's) audit of the Children at Risk program, which is administered by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI).

Created in 1985, and subsequently modified in 2000, the Children at Risk program is intended to reduce the number of students in grades 5 through 12 who are at risk of not graduating from high school. In fiscal year 2003-04, \$3.5 million in general purpose revenue (GPR) program funding was spent in 21 school districts.

"Accountability is sorely lacking in this program and every audit that has been released since its inception has noted limited compliance with the requirements of this program," remarked Jeskewitz. "If DPI is not going to require participating school districts to comply with the statutes, then we should be looking at a more accountable way to serve our at-risk students."

The audit released today found that indicators of at-risk student achievement have been mixed. "The reported five-year low for children at risk achievements in three performance objectives is a 'totally unsatisfactory' grade. We must do better," Roessler stated.

Given the State's limited fiscal resources, co-chairs Roessler and Jeskewitz welcomed the independent review of this GPR-funded program. The co-chairs anticipate that they will closely review the audit report as they consider the options available for program improvement.

The full text of the audit report is available on the Legislative Audit Bureau's website at <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lab> or by calling (608) 266-2818 to request a copy of report 05-4.

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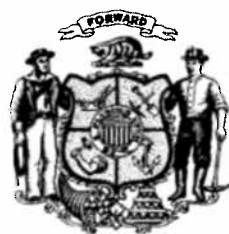
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SENATOR ROESSLER  
P.O. Box 7882 • Madison, WI 53707-7882  
(608) 266-5300 • Fax (608) 266-0423

REPRESENTATIVE JESKEWITZ  
P.O. Box 8952 • Madison, WI 53708-8952  
(608) 266-3796 • Fax (608) 282-3624



# WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE





WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE

Joint Legislative Audit Committee

Committee Co-Chairs:  
State Senator Carol Roessler  
State Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz

April 18, 2005

Ms. Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent of Public Instruction  
Department of Public Instruction  
125 South Webster Street  
Madison, Wisconsin 53707

Dear Ms. Burmaster:

The Joint Legislative Audit Committee will hold a public hearing on Legislative Audit Bureau report 05-4, *An Evaluation: Children At Risk Program*, on Wednesday, April 27, 2005, at 10:00 a.m. in Room 411 South of the State Capitol.

As this audit report relates to the activities of the Department of Public Instruction, we ask you to be present at the hearing to offer testimony in response to the audit findings and to respond to questions from committee members. Please plan to provide each committee member with a written copy of your testimony at the hearing.

Please contact Ms. Karen Asbjornson in the office of Senator Carol Roessler at 266-5300 to confirm your participation in the hearing. Thank you for your cooperation and we look forward to seeing you on April 27<sup>th</sup>.

Sincerely,

Senator Carol A. Roessler, Co-chair  
Joint Legislative Audit Committee

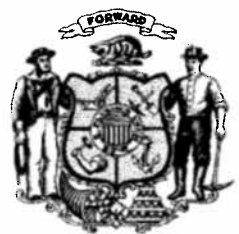
Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz, Co-chair  
Joint Legislative Audit Committee

Enclosure

cc: Janice Mueller  
State Auditor



# WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE





# State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

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Joint Legislative Audit Committee  
Wednesday, April 27, 2005  
411 South, State Capitol

## Department of Public Instruction Testimony on Children at Risk Audit

Good morning Co-chairpersons Roessler and Jeskewitz and members of the committee. I am Tony Evers, Deputy State Superintendent and I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today. Accompanying me is Beth Lewis the department staff person who oversees the Children at Risk Program.

I want to first commend State Auditor Janice Mueller and the staff from the Legislative Audit Bureau for the quality and thoroughness of the report.

The Children at Risk Categorical Aid Program provides funding to districts with the highest number of dropouts. The funding exists to help students who have not historically succeeded, to stay in school, increase their achievement, and to graduate.

The program funding represents a small but important percentage of the total amount spent for at-risk students.

From the 1999-2000 to the 2002-03 school year there was a steady increase in students meeting the performance objectives. It is noted that this past year continued to have an increase in the number served, but a slight dip in the percent of students reported to achieve at least three of the five statutory performance measures. The audit report acknowledges that "districts have attributed student achievement declines *not* to worsening performance, but to variations in procedures for identifying at-risk students and to data collection and processing errors." And we would emphasize that students in eligible districts that received at-risk funding did in fact have increased graduation rates and decreased dropout rates at levels greater than the statewide average.

These positive student outcomes occurred at a time when increasing numbers of districts were participating in the program, resulting in a reduction in the share of the \$3.5 million available. Historically districts have qualified for funding in excess of \$8 million [with only \$3.5 million being available] resulting in a proration rate as low as 43%. Looking solely at the 2003-04 school year, it means that for the 29,669 students served, districts received \$118 in categorical aid per student.



The Department of Public Instruction believes strongly in the need for accountability and we were pleased to note that with our improved attention to detail, all negative findings from the 1997 audit were removed. This improvement occurred in spite of the lack of authority the department has experienced since 1993. In fact, the primary concern outlined in the report was that the districts did not isolate in a separate account the 1.2% of funds spent on services and programs.

I encourage the continuation of the Children at Risk Categorical Aid program consistent with the options listed in the audit: "Continuing to provide \$3.5 million annually in program funding and requiring annual district reports would allow DPI to track whether districts are able to improve their reporting." I would also request the following three items that were removed by 1993 Act 16 be restored:

1. Districts that qualify for funds must submit to the department the district-wide plan that the district is required to develop under current statute.
2. Department authority to review and approve the district-wide plan for districts applying for children at risk categorical aid.
3. Year end reporting requirements include attendance, retention, high school graduation rates and the percentage of pupils who received academic credit.

I further encourage that the program focus become consistent with the actual title: Children at Risk of Not Graduating from High School. This return to a high school focus would include funding for services to students in grades 9 through 12 and evaluating those services based on retention, dropout and graduation rates. The department agrees with the audit report that "The best indicators of success for Children at Risk Program may be comparative graduation and dropout rates for participating and non-participating, but otherwise similar, students."

With restored authority and a proper focus, I believe that we will be able to facilitate district compliance with this categorical aid program.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions.



27 April 2005

Senator Carol A. Roessler  
Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz  
Joint Committee on Audit  
Room 8 South, State Capitol  
P.O. Box 7882  
Madison, WI 53707-7882

Dear Senator Roessler and Representative Jeskewitz,

I am writing to comment on the Legislative Audit Bureau's most recent evaluation of the Children At-Risk Program (Report 05-4, March 2005). My interest in the program extends back to its inception. TransCenter for Youth, Inc. was one of the first non-profit agencies to contract with the Milwaukee Public Schools under Children At-Risk in 1985. That contract supported the operation of Shalom High School, one of Milwaukee's first Partnership Schools. Since then, we have opened two additional Partnership Schools: the Northwest Opportunities Vocational Academy (NOVA) and El Puente High School for Science, Math, and Technology. In addition, I was honored to serve on the Joint Legislative Council Special Committee on Children At-Risk in 1999.

No issue will be of greater importance to the future social and economic health of Wisconsin than to insure that **all** of our children graduate from high school ready for college, work, and citizenship. The Children At-Risk statute was enacted in 1985 to foster improved graduation rates in those areas of the State where large numbers (or a high percentage) of students drop out. Given the changes in the world's economy since then, there is an even greater need to insure school success for all of our young people.

The biennial appropriation for Children At-Risk is important, but it is not the only important element of the program. I want to highlight four critical components of the statute:

1. Using the criteria in the statute, school districts are required to identify those students who are most at-risk of not graduating from high school. Like No Child Left Behind, Children At-Risk requires districts to address the needs of all the actual students enrolled.
2. Districts are encouraged to offer at-risk students options that will allow them to reconnect with the educational process. Students and their families are empowered to choose among the options the ones that will best fit their needs.
3. The statute gives authority to participating districts to contract with non-profit agencies to add Partnership Schools to the options available to students.
4. Performance-based bonus aid is awarded to districts for students who meet at least three of the outcome objectives spelled out in the statute. Districts have to *earn* the aid by creating programs that are successful in helping at-risk students move closer to graduation.

When considering the program's future, I hope the Legislature will keep all of these components, not just the funding, in mind. In Milwaukee, for example, in 2003-2004, sixteen Partnership Schools serving over 1,500 students depended on the contracting authority included in the statute. These schools are a vital part of the diversification of educational choices available to families in Milwaukee. In past audits, the Legislative Audit Bureau has consistently found that Partnership Schools out-perform regular district schools in helping students meet the Children At-Risk outcome objectives.

The Legislative Audit Bureau raises important concerns about the way the program is being implemented by some districts and the way compliance is being monitored by the Department of Public Instruction. They find it difficult to track the direct effect of the bonus aid. The auditors also note, however, that the graduation rate is going up and the dropout rate is going down in the vast majority of the districts participating in the program. Since these are the goals for the program, this finding should not be undervalued.

From my comments above, it will not surprise you that I am opposed to the first two options for the future of the program offered by the LAB in their report. Eliminating the program or merging it into other initiatives would jeopardize schools with a long track record of success, and at a time when increasing the graduation rate is more important than ever. However, I do think the program could be improved.

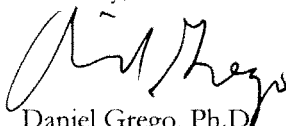
The research is clear and unequivocal on what interventions will be most successful in reconnecting at-risk youth to school. In 1999, the Special Committee on Children At-Risk drew on this research to amend the statute to encourage participating school districts to create small schools of various kinds and allow students identified as at-risk of not graduating from high school to choose the school that would best meet their needs. The program could be amended so that *only* students enrolled in such schools would be eligible for bonus aid. This change might make it easier to track the effect of the funding.

In her response to the evaluation, Superintendent Burmaster suggested targeting the program to grades 9-12 would be an improvement. I agree with her that the program could be more effective if it were more targeted. However, the statute identifies students by their grade level, not their ages. Many districts have "over-aged" middle school students who should be in ninth grade (or higher) but who have been held back. Reconnecting these young people to school and helping them catch up will be essential to maximize their chances to earn diplomas. I would recommend targeting the program to grades 7-12 so that these "over-aged" middle school students do not get left behind.

I have devoted my entire professional career to trying to find ways to increase educational opportunities for all children and their families. The Partnership Schools we have created in Milwaukee have made a huge difference in the lives of young people. Thousands of students have benefited from the opportunities provided by the Children At-Risk program, opportunities they would not have had without it. I hope you will keep this in mind while considering the program's future.

If you have any questions, or if I can be of any further help to you in this matter, please call on me.

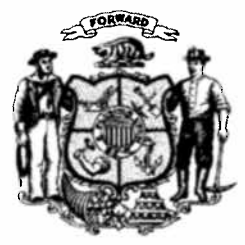
Sincerely,



Daniel Grego, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
TransCenter for Youth, Inc.



# WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE



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# Children At Risk Program

Legislative Audit Bureau  
April 2005

1

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## Overview

- ◆ The program serves students in grades 5 through 12 who are at risk of not graduating from high school
- ◆ Created by the 1985-87 Biennial Budget Act
- ◆ Since FY 1990-91, the program has been funded with \$3.5 million in GPR annually

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## Types of Students Served

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- ◆ Funded districts provide services to students who are dropouts or who meet at least two other criteria:
  - behind in high school credits earned;
  - behind in basic skill levels;
  - habitual truants;
  - parents;
  - adjudicated delinquents; or
  - certain 8<sup>th</sup> graders

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## Other Types of At-Risk Students

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- ◆ Most funding for at-risk students is not limited by the Children At Risk definition
- ◆ At-risk funds are also provided to students who:
  - are in poverty;
  - have limited English proficiency; and
  - exhibit evidence of alcohol or other drug abuse
- ◆ In FY 2003-04, the program accounted for only 1.2 percent of the \$290.7 million in state and federal funds provided for at-risk services

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## Program Participation

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- ◆ The number of districts participating increased from 13 in 1999-2000 to 21 in 2003-04
- ◆ In 2003-04, the 21 participating districts identified 29,669 at-risk students

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## Statutory Performance Objectives

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- ◆ Eligibility for program funding is based on achieving at least three of five objectives:
  - Receiving a high school diploma;
  - Remaining in school;
  - Having an attendance rate of at least 70 percent;
  - Earning at least 4.5 credits during the school year; and
  - Demonstrating gains in reading and mathematics

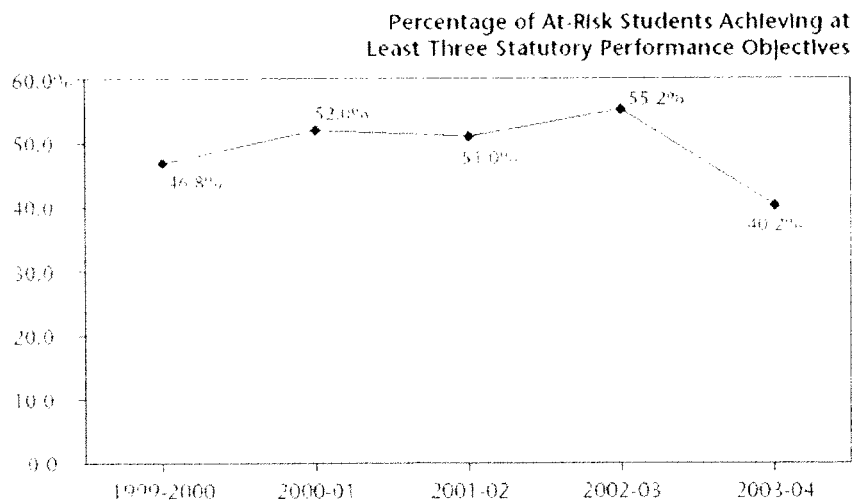
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## Funding and Compliance Issues

- ◆ Districts can receive up to 10 percent of their per pupil state equalized aid for each qualifying student
- ◆ Funding has been prorated because there are more qualifying students than available funds
- ◆ School districts do not comply with statutory requirements to:
  - Specify the amount of funds dedicated to each at-risk program
  - Provide a preference for alternative schools, charter schools, schools within schools, and private agencies

## Student Achievement



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## Program Performance

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- ◆ Among 11 districts that participated each year from 1999-2000 through 2002-03:
  - The graduation rate increased by an average of 6.5 percentage points, compared to an average of 2.5 percentage points statewide
  - 10 of the 11 districts reduced their dropout rates, and 6 of 11 districts had dropout rates below the state average of 2 percent

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## Future of the Program

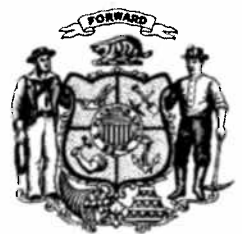
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- ◆ The Governor has recommended a continued level of funding of \$3.5 million annually
- ◆ Other options the Legislature could consider:
  - Eliminate the program;
  - Merge the program with another program; or
  - Merge the funding into general school aids

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# WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE



## Children at Risk Program Audit

### **\*HIGHLIGHTS\***

3.5 million has been annually appropriated in GPR for the Children's At Risk program

In FY 2003-04, 21 participating districts identified 29,669 students as at risk of not graduating.

Students meeting at least three statutory guidelines has decreased from 46.8% in 1999-2000 to 40.2% in 2003-2004. This is the lowest level in the five-year period

3 of 5 of these requirements must be met for a district to receive reimbursement from the Children At Risk program:

- 1) Receiving a high school diploma
- 2) Remaining in School
- 3) An Attendance rate of at least 70%
- 4) Earning at least 4.5 credits or prorated amount for shorter enrollment,
- 5) Demonstrating on standardized tests a gain in reading and mathematics commensurate with at-risk enrollment

Success rates varied from 80.0 percent in Janesville and Stevens Point to 25.0 percent or less in five other districts.

In a sample of participating districts, the graduation rate increased 6.5 percentage points, from 71.1 percent to 77.6 percent. Statewide, the increase was 2.5 percentage points.

### INTRODUCTION

- Purpose of program is to reach students in grades 5-12 at risk of not graduating from high school
- School districts provide a broad range of programs and services to meet the needs of at-risk students, including counseling, after-school programs, and placement in alternative high schools.
- At Risk Students are defined under statute as:

- 1) One or more years behind their age group in the number of high school credits attained
- 2) Two or more years behind their age group in basic skill levels
- 3) Habitual truants who are absent from school for 5 or more days of the semester without acceptable excuse
- 4) Parents
- 5) Adjudicated delinquents
- 6) 8<sup>th</sup> grade pupils who failed to be promoted to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade or who scored below the basic level in each subject area on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination

Districts may also apply for At Risk funding if they have at least 30 dropouts or a dropout rate of 5.0%

- In the 2003-04 school year, 21 districts participated in the Children At Risk program. They identified 29,669 at-risk students.
- Milwaukee Public Schools will receive \$1.9 million, or 54.3 percent of all funds the State has allocated for the Children At Risk program.
- It is difficult to isolate the effects of the Children At Risk program because most districts do not specify which programs that At Risk funding goes to---even though they are required to do it by statute.
- Statutory performance objectives are: remaining in school, attendance rates of at least 70 percent, and demonstrating reading and math gains
- Districts receive funding based on the number of their at-risk students who achieve statutory performance objectives.

#### OPTIONS FOR LEGISLATURE

- 1) Eliminate the program; however, most districts that funding for other district programs would likely be reduced to make up for the At Risk shortfall
- 2) Merge the program with other program funding (like the Alternative Education Grant program); this would require school district to report specific program expenditures to DPI. Current participating At-Risk schools do not have to do this.
- 3) Merge the program with general school aids; this would make funding available to all districts but would reduce the funding for the 21 districts currently participating in the At Risk program.
- 4) Maintain the program in its current form.

1999 Wisconsin Act 123, were primarily intended to simplify and

focus the program by:

- making program participation permissive for all districts, rather than mandatory for some;
- lowering to 30 students, or more than 5 percent of high school enrollment, the number of dropouts a district must have had in the prior year to qualify for funding;
- requiring school districts to provide a specific amount of Children At Risk program funding to each district program in which at-risk students are enrolled, based on the program's ability to meet the statutory performance criteria; and
- requiring districts to provide a preference in allocating Children At Risk funding to alternative schools; charter schools; schools within schools; or private, nonprofit, nonsectarian agencies located in the school district or within five miles of the district.
- LAB Reviewed the effects of Act 123 by interviewing staff at the 21 districts, reviewing data, and examining alternative sources of funding

### **PROGRAMS SERVING AT-RISK STUDENTS**

- School districts provide a broad range of programs and services to meet the needs of at-risk students, including individual counseling by a school counselor, social worker, or psychologist; after-school programs that offer academic credits; and placement in alternative high schools.
- In addition, all districts receiving Children At Risk funding offer classes that allow students to earn high school diplomas or high school equivalency degrees by taking the certificate of general educational development (GED) tests and completing additional requirements. These classes are typically taken at local technical colleges, but they may also be provided directly by districts.
- Some of the circumstances or conditions school staff look for in determining whether a student is in need of additional "at-risk" services include:
  - •living in a household with an income below the poverty line;
  - evidence of alcohol or other drug use;
  - •limited English proficiency;
  - •patterns of disruptive behavior or significant changes in behavior that could suggest family domestic problems; and
  - •parents or siblings who failed in or dropped out of school.

- In recognition of the diverse factors that can place a student at risk, the State and the federal government provided school districts with a total of \$290.7 million in FY 2003-04 to serve at-risk students from kindergarten through high school, or to prevent students from becoming at-risk
- Examples of programs that serve the broader population of at-risk students include:
  - federal Title I basic grants, which provided \$143.4 million to supplement instructional programs for disadvantaged students from low-income families;
  - the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program, which provided \$94.8 million in GPR to reduce class sizes in kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in schools in which at least half of the students are from low-income families; and
  - the Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program, which provided \$8.3 million in GPR to improve the reading, writing, and speaking ability of students with limited English proficiency.

### **SCHOOL DISTRICT PARTICIPATION AND FUNDING**

- More schools have been participating in the At Risk program; thus reducing the amount available to each participating school.
- Many school districts' applications for funds are not timely. Only 10 of the 21 school districts that requested funding for 2003-2004 met the deadline. 5 received extensions from the DPA, and 6 submitted their applications up to two months late.
- All districts that applied received funding, even if they submitted application materials past the deadline.
- Districts did receive a greater percentage of the funding for which they were eligible in 2003-2004 than in the prior two years because fewer students achieved at least three of the performance objectives.
- In 2003-2004, 23 school districts were eligible to participate in the At Risk program, but Neenah and Weabeno did not participate. Neenah did not request funding and Wabeno did not meet performance objectives previously and did not apply in 2003-2004.
- Milwaukee Public Schools will receive the largest amount of funding at \$1.9 million, which equals 54.3% of the \$3.5 million allocated. By comparison, Rhinelander receives less than 1% of the total at \$6,638.

### **Evaluating District Use of Children at Risk Funds**

- Districts do not collect data linking students who met the statutory performance objectives to the specific programs in which they participated
- Districts do not often differentiate between those students who meet the statutory definition of at-risk and other students participating in at-risk programs who require additional support

- Students participating in more than one at-risk program or receiving more than one type of service during the school year are usually not classified by the district.
- The At Risk program typically represents a small percentage of any single district's at-risk program or service; thus, specifying programs' related funding is a low priority for districts. For example: Oshkosh's funding from At Risk only represents 4.8% of the total spend for at-risk students.

## **AT RISK STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

### **Identification of At-Risk Students**

- All districts are required by statute to identify at-risk students annually, but only those that request At Risk funding report these data to the DPI
- Although districts are required to report how many of the enrolled students achieved each of five statutory performance objectives, a number of districts do not comply with this requirement.
- 6 of the 21 districts participating in 2003-04 reported a greater number of at-risk students achieving the performance objectives than were reported as enrolled in at-risk programs.

### **Achievement of Statutory Performance Objectives**

- 40.2 percent of identified at-risk students achieved at least three of the statutory performance objectives in the 2003-04 school year. This was the smallest percentage in five years and represents a one-year decline of 2,625 at-risk students
- Nearly all of the decline occurred in four school districts: the Racine Unified School District, Milwaukee Public Schools, the Green Bay Area Public School District, and the School District of Superior.
- Districts have attributed student achievement declines not to worsening performance, but to variations in procedures for identifying at-risk students and to data collection and processing errors.
- However, because school districts typically do not use these data for purposes other than reporting to DPI, reporting is unlikely to improve.
- District performance data are self-reported, and variations in district performance may be partially attributable to differing interpretations of the broadly defined performance objectives.
- Overall, 60.7 percent of at-risk 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students served by districts receiving Children At Risk funds graduated from high school.
- 54.6 percent of at-risk students remained in school in the 2003-04 school year, only 38.4 percent made gains in reading and math.
- Students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade were the least successful in achieving at least three objectives, whereas students in 12<sup>th</sup> grade were the most successful.



- The success of 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students in meeting at least three objectives can be partially attributed to the fact that they can meet one objective by graduating, which students in other grades cannot do.
- Determining gains in reading and math may become easier as school districts implement new federal testing requirements.

### **Graduation and Drop-Out Rates**

- The graduation rate increased in 8 of the 11 school districts participating in the Children At Risk program each school year from 1999-2000 through 2002-03.
- The average graduation rate increase for these districts was greater than the statewide increase
- The largest decrease, 2.7 percentage points, occurred in the Racine Unified School District. Only the Oshkosh Area School District did not reduce its dropout rate. The Milwaukee Public Schools dropout rate, which was 10.1 percent in 2002-03, remained above both the statewide rate and the rates of the other participating districts.
- Because funding for the Children At Risk program represents only 1.2 percent of funding considered to benefit at-risk students, and because separate programs or services are not provided exclusively with Children At Risk funds, it is not possible to directly assess the program's effectiveness.

## **FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS**

### **Developing Effective Plans for Serving At-Risk Students**

- Of the 21 school districts that participated in the 2003-04 school year, only 9 reported having updated plans for at-risk students
- Both s. 121.02(1)(n), Wis. Stats., and s. 118.153(2)(a), Wis. Stats., require every school district, regardless of whether it participates in the Children At Risk program, to annually develop a plan describing how it will meet the needs of at-risk students.
- Maintaining an updated at-risk plan can be useful to school district managers, educators, and parents. For example:
  - the process of developing a plan can provide school district staff a means to assess the appropriateness of services provided and to identify gaps in coverage;
  - having a plan can ensure that all district staff are aware of programming options and follow the same procedures for identifying and providing appropriate services to at-risk students; and
  - an at-risk plan that contains a process for systematic evaluation of programs and services could also be used to identify those programs and services that are the most effective.
- LAB identified several best practices for districts to maintain At-Risk plans with a variety of classification, staffing, and practice strategy (see page 35).

## Future Funding Strategies

### 1. Eliminating the Program

- The Children At Risk program funding provides a small percentage of the total funding for at-risk services statewide; and most participating districts do not currently comply with one or more statutory requirements.
- Districts Generally do not:
  - Annually update plans describing how the district will meet the needs of at-risk students
  - Identify private, nonprofit, and nonsectarian agencies located within the district that can provide at-risk programs
  - Provide a specific amount of Children At Risk funding to each district program enrolling at-risk students
  - Provide funding to district programs based on their ability to meet the statutory student performance objectives
  - Provide a preference in allocating Children At Risk funding to alternative schools, charter schools, schools within schools, and private agencies

School districts reporting to DPI has often been inaccurate, and it is unclear whether districts will be able to improve their reporting.

Most district officials believe that providing at-risk services were a priority, and if funding is eliminated, other not-at-risk programs would face a reduction.

LAB found that "Consequently, there would likely be little effect on services for at-risk students if the program were eliminated."

### 2. Consolidating Program Funding

- Combining the program with the Alternative Education Grant program may be feasible. The 1999 Wisconsin Act 9 created the Alt. Ed. Grant.
- Merging these two programs could improve program efficiency. For example, districts receiving funding through the Alternative Education Grant program are required to submit an annual application to DPI that includes many requirements similar to those of the Children At Risk program, such as describing:
  - why a program for at-risk students is needed;
  - the types of pupils who will be served;
  - the community agencies the district will employ to provide services to enrolled students; and
  - how the district will measure program success.
- Additionally, merging these programs could increase accountability,

as districts participating in the Alternative Education Grant program are required to submit reports to DPI regarding program expenditures, whereas no financial reporting is required for the Children At Risk program.

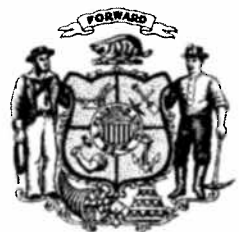
- Placing this restriction on Children At Risk funds—or eliminating the restriction for Alternative Education Grant funds—would significantly affect which districts benefit from these funds.
- Children At Risk program funding could be merged into general school aids, which would benefit all school districts.
- such redistribution would reduce the amount of funds targeted to the 21 districts currently participating in the Children At Risk program, while nonparticipating districts would receive a small amount of additional funding with no additional obligation to serve at-risk students.

### **3. Maintaining Existing Program Requirements**

- The Governor's FY 2005-07 biennial budget proposes a continued level of funding of \$3.5 million annually for the Children At Risk program.
- District staff indicated that although Children At Risk program funding is small compared to total district budgets, demands on available funding for district programs have placed an increased emphasis on maintaining all available funding sources.



# WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE



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## At-risk Students Fare Poorly

**The Number Of Students Doing Well Enough For Their Districts To Qualify For Aid Fell To The Lowest Level In Five Years.**

**Wisconsin State Journal :: LOCAL/WISCONSIN :: B1**

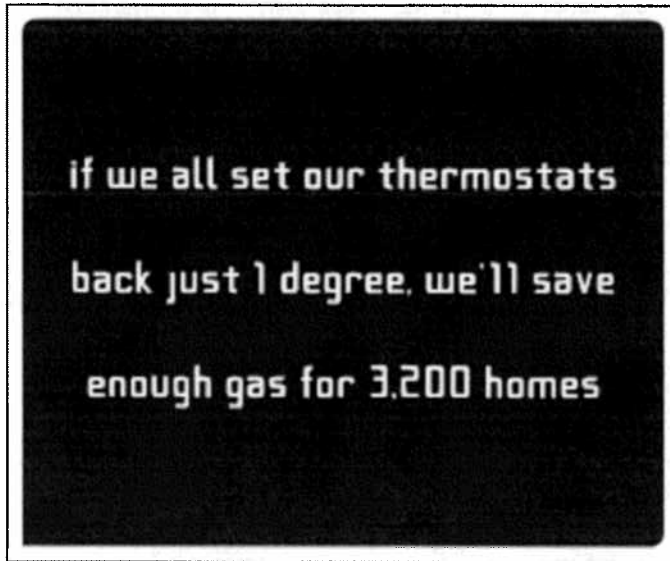
**Saturday, March 5, 2005  
Todd Richmond Associated Press**

The number of at-risk students meeting performance standards to make their districts eligible for state aid dropped 15 percent overall in the last school year, an audit released Friday showed.

The state's Children at Risk program, created in the 1985-87 state budget, supplies \$3.5 million to 21 participating school districts to help troubled students in grades five to 12 graduate from high school.

The money can help pay for counseling, after-school programs and alternative schools for the 29,000 at-risk students in those districts last school year, according to the audit.

For their districts to get the money, at-risk students must meet at least three of five performance standards: earn a high school diploma, stay in school, attend school 70 percent of the time, earn at least 4.5 credits and demonstrate reading and math improvement.



The review by the nonpartisan state Legislative Audit Bureau found 55.2 percent of at-risk students achieved three of those objectives in the 2002-03 school year. That dropped to 40.2 percent in 2003-04, the lowest level in the past five years, the study found. Most of the decline came in school districts in Green Bay, Milwaukee, Racine and Superior, the audit said.

State Sen. Carol Roessler, R-Oshkosh, co-chairwoman of the Legislative Audit Committee, called the decline unacceptable.

"We must do better," she said in a prepared statement.

Paul Stuiber, the audit director who prepared the report, said he couldn't tell what caused the drop.

State law requires the school districts to track what programs it spends the at-risk money on. Few of the districts have done that and instead have dumped the money into their general funds, making the program virtually untraceable, Stuiber said.

Districts don't track the money because the amount is such a small part of spending on at-risk students, the audit said. In the 2003-04 school year, for example, Children At Risk funds were just 1.2 percent of all district funding for at-risk students, the audit said.

The accounting gap makes it difficult to judge what impact the Children at Risk money may have had on a particular program, the audit said.

"Accountability is sorely lacking in this program," said state Rep. Suzanne Jeskewitz, the other co-chairwoman of the audit committee. "If DPI (Department of Public Instruction) is not going to require participating school districts to comply with the statutes, then we should be looking at a more accountable way to serve our at-risk students."